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HEADLINE: His mission: move UM into top tier;
Q&A -- C.D. 'Dan' Mote Jr.;
Players

BYLINE: LIZ BOWIE, SUN REPORTER

BODY:

The University of Maryland, College Park celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding this month, with a mixture of satisfaction at significant improvement in its academic reputation and frustration at failing to move closer to its goal of joining the top 10 state universities in the country.

College Park placed 18th among 162 public universities in U.S. News and World Report rankings published last summer. When the magazine created the ranking system eight years ago, the school ranked 30th.

There is also concern about fast-rising tuition costs that are making attendance at College Park unaffordable to a growing number of middle-class students.

C.D. "Dan" Mote Jr., the university's president since 1998, recently discussed the strides the college has made and what it still needs to do.

You have said that you want the university to join the top 10 state universities in the country. How do you think College Park will get there, and how long will it take?

We have the capacity to get there. Our move up in the rankings has been very substantial, but has been somewhat stalled around 18th, principally by financial issues. But I think the way to get there is very clear. You need to build top-ranked programs and recruit the students and the research enterprise.

One of the indicators where you ranked below your peers nationally was in six-year graduation rates and two-year retention rates. Why is that, and what can be done to change it?

The six-year graduation rate when I arrived in 1998 was 63 percent, and that is extremely low. Our six-year graduation rate should be in the low 80s. ... It should be between 82 and 85. Right now it is about 77 percent, which is, I

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would say, a phenomenal transformation in seven years - to go from 63 to 77. In two years, we will be at 80 percent.

How did you achieve that improvement?

We [formerly] had a lot of part-time students. ... That is not a bad thing. But in this kind of thing, when you are measuring graduation rates, it looks bad. ... So we have changed our profile tremendously in terms of the types of students and what they are coming here for. They are much more focused on academic issues. A lot more focused on graduate students. So it is not nearly as wide-open and diverse as it used to be.

You say you are a bit stalled in 18th position and that the university can be committed to moving ahead, but unless there is a real state commitment it is not going to happen. Is there a state commitment right now?

We can't do it by ourselves. The state has to step up too, in various ways - not just the operating budget, but the capital budget, by allowing us to help the state in its economic development. ... If we get the partnership ... there is nothing that can stop us.

You couldn't find a better place in the country to create a flagship public university than this. Here we are between Baltimore and Washington, all the federal research enterprise around us. We are near the nation's capital, with the international programs - and international is so important these days. Security is such an important issue for the country as a whole. We are right in the middle of [the] security enterprise.

So you might say, Well, what is our greatest problem? It is on this sheet here. (The sheet shows two line graphs indicating a large gap between the per-pupil expenditures at College Park and those at other top state universities.)

You can see, going back to 1996, we have not been close to average. We have been about \$3,000 below the average of our peer group. So, when you have 25,000 students, you are talking over 90 million dollars a year. ... Then, you see, we are projecting where we will be this year. And it is going to be about \$2,400 per student below the average. Only 75 million below the average. That is better; it is not excellent. I think, ultimately, to meet the top 10, we have to get up to [average]. ... It is a reasonable goal.

College Park's weakness was believed to be the biological sciences in the past. Can you talk about whether that has changed, or if there are other areas that the university needs to expand or grow to improve [its] position?

When I first arrived in 1998, my observation was that the biological sciences were not up to the standard that they need to be. In fact, you cannot build a great university in this period without strong biological sciences.

We have invested substantially in the biological sciences. The state has helped us greatly. Governor Ehrlich accelerated the building of a biological sciences research building, which will open this fall. We are creating a department of biological engineering. That is in the process now. So we are striving to this direction.

We have historical strengths in the physical sciences, in engineering and mathematics. We need to continue those. We have to rebuild the physics building. We have a 50-year-old physics building that is not suitable for modern physics at all. We have spent the last two years educating people about this, taking people on tours through the building and so on.

Just yesterday, we had the ground-breaking for the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's] national center for weather and climate prediction. This a monumental shift. We are going to build the world's weather and climate prediction center at this site. NOAA is moving 800 people in there in the first round. It is a 280,000-square-foot building on 10 acres. We are going to co-locate facilities with them. For decades, NOAA has wanted to move here to partner with us. It has finally come to pass.

I think the whole area of physical sciences, space sciences, national security and engineering, those will be there as

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well. I think those areas are coming very rapidly and are gaining strength.

Our public policy school is going to double its size, double its student population and double its activities. It has a plethora of ... advantages in this location, of the world's policy center.

English, history and language will be strong. Language here is much more than the teaching of language. Language has to do with the language, literature, culture of different regions. So it is language in a much broader context, and that is very important for living in this globalized world. People need to have a better understanding of other worlds and cultures. It is very important for national security, as we have come to understand.

When you came [to College Park], you talked about opportunities and missed opportunities. Since you have been here, how have you taken advantage of where you are to create something for the state?

I think the state is just filled with missed opportunities. This is a very privileged state, a very wealthy state, optimally located. In some ways it may have had it too easy. Things have just come to it in a natural way. It could underinvest, for example, in higher education tremendously and still do well because smart people came here.

It is very easy to find other places that had to create their own wind. It didn't come naturally. North Carolina is a good example of that, by the way. ...

In my case, I just looked at what the assets were around me and tried to take advantage of that. The single most challenging of these initiatives, if I had to pick out one, would be the creation of the research park right next to the campus.

Five years ago we had no land and no money and the state had essentially no research parks, which was pretty remarkable for a state in this location. We essentially now have 130 acres located seven-tenths of a mile from the campus, inside the Beltway. We have major tenants and we have a development park already in this place.

It required a number of risks, shall we say. First, we bought a building that was being vacated. This building became available on 38 acres. We borrowed money from ourselves and bought this property and this building.

Shortly thereafter, an opportunity came up ... to compete nationally for a major security center - a university-affiliated research center. There are about 10 of these in the country. Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab is another. So these are very substantial things that, when they are founded, they tend to last forever because they are serving some national need. So we competed for this language enterprise [the University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language]. If we hadn't bought the building, we wouldn't have had a place to put it. We ended up winning this competition because of our location and our talents.

So then we had that facility. Then we put out an option to buy a piece of property next to it, and there was about \$20 million, and we didn't have the money and we couldn't raise it - but we still bought the option for 18 months for a fairly substantial cost, something like \$400,000 to \$500,000, and we tried to find some development partner who would buy the property and help put this together.

We were able to talk people into ultimately letting us borrow money to buy the property. Once we got the property, then we got the NOAA building.

So this is how big things happen. Now we have 130 acres. We have the NOAA building; we have our center for advanced languages. We have private-sector companies in there. We have a 126,000-square-foot building that we are building ourselves that we are going to bring private-sector people into. About half of it is leased out already.

In fact, on the drawing boards already this is going to be the largest research park in the state and in fact in the Washington region.

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Is that why the state should begin to invest more in higher education?

The people of the state need a first-class higher education system. Our state has the highest fraction of its work force working in science and technology of any state in the United States. It needs a range of higher education systems, but ... the top school has to be a really first-class place that can compete on a world scale.

Are you concerned that you are too expensive or that there are too many students in the state that can't afford it?

We are certainly expensive. There is no doubt about that. Our biggest concern is debt. ... So we are working very hard to control debt at graduation. We have models, a number of models where we are looking at using scholarship money to control debt ... so at least it gives them some reasonable limit on how much they have to borrow to come here. Clearly, the key to all this is the state; the state support per student has to increase, so less falls on the students.

This accumulated debt is a big problem - not only for the students, but it is a big problem for the country. The students can't go to graduate school; they can't pursue careers that have lower-income options. They can't buy a house; they can't start a business. It is a national problem, a big-scale problem.

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GRAPHIC: Photo(s)

C.D. "Dan" Mote Jr. says his university needs to increase per-pupil spending.

AMY DAVIS : SUN PHOTOGRAPHER

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